

# The professional qualification system in Spain and workers with low qualification levels

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## SUMMARY

**This document examines how the Community strategy for lifelong learning and the role of the assessment, recognition and accreditation of professional competences and knowledge within this strategy have been taken on board in Spain. It looks at the legislation introduced by the national government in the context of the Spanish system of Autonomous Communities. It analyses the redefinition of vocational guidance to ensure the effectiveness of the tools proposed and, lastly, it evaluates the effectiveness of these measures from the viewpoint of workers with low qualifications. To this end the document refers to the main laws and regulations introduced in recent years and the relevant literature, as well as empirical studies and research in which the authors have been involved in the last two years.**

## How Community policies on professional qualifications have been taken on board in Spain

In the 1990s, the government, employer representatives and the main trade unions in Spain signed three major agreements on continuous training (1992, 1996 and 2000). This period also saw the implementation of two national vocational training plans (1993 and 1998) with the support of political parties and the major trade unions. The end of the second plan saw the introduction of an education law on vocational training which, unlike other education laws, also had the support of parties and trade unions. The law in question was the *Ley Orgánica de Cualificaciones y Formación Profesional* <sup>(1)</sup> (Law No 5/2002), according to which responsibility for regulating and coordinating the *Sistema Nacional de Cualificaciones y Formación Profesional* <sup>(2)</sup> lies with the national government, without prejudice to the role of the Autonomous Communities and the involvement of social partners (Article 5.1). Said involvement takes the form of forums such as the General Council for Vocational Training, a consultative body which provides advice on vocational training.

This process initially sought to achieve recognition of three training sub-systems – state approved vocational training, occupational training and continuous training – and the need to establish points of contact between them. It was the Community's emphasis on lifelong learning that also led to the identification and recognition of informal learning through professional practice and personal experience.

### The SNCFP (National Vocational Training and Qualifications System)

The SNCFP comes under the Ministry of Education and Science. The latter has entrusted the National Qualifications Institute with developing and regulating the National Catalogue of Professional Qualifications which serves as the reference for a modular training catalogue. The National Catalogue must also incorporate procedures enabling the qualifications of any individual to be recognised, assessed, accredited and registered, regardless of how they are obtained. Likewise, it must incorporate the corresponding information and registration systems.

This is a complex process which takes time, and one in which training only plays a secondary role, since assessment is the key. It is all about constructing

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<sup>(1)</sup> Law on Vocational Training and Qualifications.

<sup>(2)</sup> National Vocational Training and Qualifications System, hereafter SNCFP.

an external assessment system, a new concept in Spain, which has to earn the trust of potential users.

Implementing the SNCFP is further complicated by the system of autonomous government. The Autonomous Communities can assert their own authority in this area – after all, some of them set up their own qualification institutes years before this national law was passed and there are 11 autonomous accreditation bodies already in existence.

There are three aspects to the National Catalogue of Professional Qualifications: 1) it aims to identify and define professional qualifications indicating professional level and family <sup>(3)</sup>; 2) each professional qualification is made up of competence units which are in turn defined in terms of activities and activity criteria; 3) each competence unit has its own associated training modules.

The training modules must specify, clearly and unambiguously, the title of the occupation to which they lead, the qualification level of the occupation, the associated competence units, the duration of the training, what the training involves (in terms of abilities and content), the assessment criteria and the requirements that have to be met in order to teach these modules.

Regulation is a complex and wide-ranging task which, although it builds on the work done for the professional accreditation certificates introduced by a series of Royal Decrees in the previous decade, must ensure that levels, professions and types of training are integrated, all of which could make it a very slow process. Indeed, only 162 qualifications have been approved since 2004, out of a target of approximately 600.

The professional accreditation certificates are also regulated in terms of requirements for obtaining proof of competences, the assessment committees responsible for their application and the issuing of certificates. The latter aspect seeks to facilitate the process for workers, and it is therefore possible to obtain the certificate by accumulating partial 'occupational credits' with a view to eventually applying for full certification. In short, the model proposed is inclusive – covering learning in a variety of forms, acquired via different routes and from different sources – and universal – aimed at the whole of the working population, whether active or inactive. It is also reliable, transparent and credible.

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<sup>(3)</sup> The Spanish system has, until now, been based on five professional levels, and so all work completed to date will need to be adapted to suit the new European Qualifications Framework.

The situation is therefore complex, owing both to the various territorial considerations to be taken into account and to the involvement of different – educational and employment – government parties, and also to the need to involve social partners in the definition of the system. The study carried out by INCUAL (2003) demonstrated the long period of time needed to develop, under the new system, the model for ongoing training and for equivalences between the initial training system, the professional training system and the learning through experience system.

## Social partners and accreditation

The parties involved (government, employers and unions) agree that the system has its advantages. These are summarised below, incorporating the opinions of various authors on the subject (CIDEA, 2000; INCUAL, 2003; MEC, 2003; CCOO PV, 2005a; Tejada and Navío, 2005). In the eyes of employers, the system offers the following advantages: it is a source of differentiation and competitiveness; it facilitates the selection of the right personnel; it simplifies the definition of jobs; it allows training to be tailored to real needs; it makes it possible to work by 'competence management', leading to a better trained, multi-skilled and motivated staff, reducing the number of levels in the organisational structure, optimising labour costs, filling vacant posts through internal promotion, and simplifying personnel management and administration; it provides basic information on personnel; it promotes employment mobility.

From the trade unions' point of view, the advantages are: the possibility of associating competences with compensation mechanisms; work experience acquires the same status as education; the worker knows what the company expects of him/her; improved worker employability; and employment mobility opportunities can be gauged more accurately when the competences required in other areas of the company are known.

Lastly, from the government's viewpoint, the advantages are: transparency of the labour market; a better qualified working population; enhanced quality and consistency of the professional training system; promotion of mobility of workers within EU Member States; fostering of lifelong training.

All these advantages are potentially offered by the system, but it is a potential that cannot be realised until the system is developed. Moreover, they cannot become a reality without vocational guidance, which in turn will guarantee equality. This is something we will return to later.

## Impact on vocational guidance policies

Vocational guidance never used to be central to public employment and training policies but in the last few years it has featured more and more regularly, at least as regards legislation and institutional dialogue. This is noted in the OECD study (2004) which confirms the role of vocational guidance in improving the effectiveness and efficiency of labour markets and educational systems, as well as its contribution to social equality.

However, the contribution of vocational guidance policies to each of these objectives has been limited (CCOO PV, 2006a). Existing vocational guidance policies and mechanisms have proved to be flawed, fragmentary and confined to specific contexts (CCOO PV, 2005b) and have also been described as too rigid, general and inconsistent (CIDEA, 2000: 13), as they have pursued objectives and tasks that tended to be very specific and dictated by the system under which they come (stimulation in the case of active employment policies or vocational and educational guidance in the case of the education system). At the same time, more and more is being expected of vocational guidance, as it must also meet transverse objectives arising from its new role as 'intermediary'. The education and employment systems are inextricably linked, forming a complex landscape and vocational guidance is expected to provide a map for navigating this landscape. Furthermore, vocational guidance now applies to all stages of life. Vocational guidance systems must be both universal – aimed at the whole population – and enduring, focusing on promoting people's ability to manage their career path throughout their lives. There is no doubt that vocational guidance is essential nowadays, especially for vulnerable workers.

## Competence recognition and accreditation systems

The comparative analysis of the different competence recognition, assessment and accreditation procedures carried out as part of the experimental project for assessment and recognition of professional qualifications in various Autonomous Communities throughout Spain has identified a number of essential accreditation mechanisms (MECD, 2003):

1. Information, guidance and advice;
2. Assessment planning;
3. Proof of competences;
4. Certification and registration of competences.

Of the main conclusions drawn from the analysis of the project's results, the following are considered most important:

- The applicability and validity of the model in all the Autonomous Communities which took part. The adaptation of the process and its development to the idiosyncrasies of the different territories and sectors of activity played a part in achieving this applicability;
- The importance of having vocational guidance counsellors and assessors involved in, respectively, the candidate placement stage and the assessment planning stage;
- The benefits derived from collaboration in the definition of assessment tools and in the assessment process itself with professionals in different training fields, i.e. occupational training and state-approved training, and with those from the professional sectors, as this brings validation closer to the reality of the workplace;
- The effectiveness of the assessment tools designed: competence reference index, self-assessment questionnaire, competence dossier and proof of competence guide. Emphasis on the need to redefine the competence dossier and the importance of making it easier to obtain direct proof in the workplace;
- The need to adapt the times at which the vocational guidance and assessment services are on offer to times when candidates are available;
- The benefit of enhancing guidance counsellors' and assessors' qualification levels through specific training programmes.

To date, however, very little progress has been made beyond this project, which is still the State benchmark. Owing to the national government's failure to implement accreditation systems, some Autonomous Communities are developing their own mechanisms, albeit on a trial basis. The studies referred to in the following section are based on these trials and simulations.

## Guidance for persons with low qualification levels for inclusion in the SNCFP

### **Accreditation of competences and exclusion from the labour market**

It is important to highlight the potential of a system like this for people who have only a basic education – compulsory schooling – or no education, since the certification of informal learning attributes public recognition, both official and legal, of knowledge acquired outside of established education and training systems. We believe professional competence accreditation processes offer potential benefits in the following areas (CCOO PV, 2005a):

- getting a job: the formal recognition of competences should facilitate the search for work, since it provides an objective indicator of an individual's professional skills and abilities;
- promotion at work: as an open mechanism this system facilitates the ongoing acquisition of competences and ever greater recognition of qualifications;
- ongoing training: creating a system which incorporates within itself a comprehensive training system fosters, guides and allows workers constantly to be in an active state of ongoing training;
- formal recognition of informal learning: this point is crucial especially for people with low qualification levels, who could be the greatest beneficiaries, as it paves the way for the recognition of competences developed in the workplace and/or via other non-formal and informal routes.

While this system may present a number of benefits, the potential risks cannot be ignored. Thus, possible downsides can be identified (CCOO PV, 2005a):

- first of all, there is the fundamental risk of exacerbating the exclusion of people who, because they have no formal accreditation for their competences, end up not obtaining said recognition, thus creating a new distinction between lowly-qualified persons;
- secondly, steps must be taken to ensure that this system really is accessible to the people who need it most, i.e. people with low qualifications, since if not it could simply become a way of obtaining a 'new' type of recognition (a new certificate) for people with medium to high qualification levels, just one more form of accreditation;
- lastly, there is a danger of creating too much red tape. A system like this needs to be proactive, targeted and accessible to people to encourage participation in a process which is likely to be voluntary and involve a certain cost for applicants in terms of time and effort.

## Proposals for the guidance of people with low qualification levels

In this section, we examine a number of areas that require attention to help the new system fulfil its potential and minimise the risks for people with low qualification levels, basing this on work done in the VISUAL Project (CCOO PV, 2006b). In this examination, we must distinguish stages or steps in the accreditation and related guidance process, each of which must be approached differently.

First of all, timing the introduction/awareness of the system is important. People with low qualification levels tend to have greater difficulty in accessing formal processes, such as those involved in the SNCFP. Raising awareness of the new system, 'taking' it to the target population, is essential if these people are to be reached.

Secondly, the whole system needs to be adapted to the wide range of groups with 'special needs': people with various physical and/or mental disabilities, people in socially vulnerable situations, immigrants, etc. These groups can benefit, as regards employment, from the legal recognition of their professional competences and qualifications, but will require special care in the process to prevent the problems that tend to occur when processes are standardised.

Regarding the competence assessment stage, first of all it is considered that wherever possible the best option is assessment by professionals from the sector who are trained as assessors, carried out in the workplace, 'in vivo', with the worker being notified as to when he/she will be assessed and what this will entail. Even so, this option may need to be combined with tests at specially adapted locations, particularly in cases where the individual's job does not make it possible to demonstrate the specific competences for which accreditation is required. Also, in this regard, assessments must take place at different times, and not be performed all at once, to facilitate the correction or repetition of activities if necessary, allowing more information to be collected to ensure the most accurate assessment possible.

Moreover, again as regards assessment, it is felt that the person being assessed must know exactly how he/she will be assessed, what he/she will be assessed on and what is expected of him/her. In other words, he/she must be aware of the professional activities that will be assessed and how. This will help improve the quality and transparency of the competence assessment process.

As regards training within the framework of the SNCFP, we believe this must be a tool which promotes, makes possible and facilitates learning in the workplace as well as the development and acquisition of professional competences at the training facility. This requires a new understanding of a train-

ing model focused on the acquisition of professional competences – in short, focused on the joint acquisition of 'knowledge' and 'know how'. It is also essential to pay particular attention to the practical and applied dimension of training, incorporating specific aspects that make it possible to organise the work experience acquired and develop new professional competences.

Moreover, in the same vein, the training provided under the SNCFP must be organised in the form of a 'training journey'. In other words, training must not be considered as just an isolated event in the worker's professional development as he/she goes through the procedures involved in accrediting competences, but rather as a process that allows a gradual acquisition of tools and resources thereby making it possible for a person to obtain, bit by bit, ever higher professional qualifications on the professional ladder.

## Conclusions: problems and challenges posed by the SNCFP

We will begin by highlighting some of the problems that have arisen in the implementation of the SNCFP in Spain to date and which the introduction of the new European Qualifications Framework in September 2006 will probably exacerbate. First of all, the Spanish system has always been based on five levels of qualification and must now be adapted to the recently established eight levels. Secondly, there is the risk that, as has happened to date, it will be the higher qualification levels that will arouse most interest, with the lower levels being developed slowly and less fully, widening the breach within the workforce. Lastly, in terms of content, qualification levels are still oriented exclusively towards occupational considerations, while general competences and knowledge are not reflected in any of the qualifications approved and recognised, despite being considered highly relevant in labour relations.

In any event, as regards the SNCFP what matters most to workers with low qualification levels is its actual benefit: will certification really help individuals in the search for jobs and improve their employment situation? The SNCFP involves workers in a necessarily costly process (in terms of emotion, time and almost certainly money), and it is therefore essential that the outcome be beneficial to the individual concerned, 'beneficial' being understood as improving the employment conditions and/or prospects of the people involved.

With regard to the above, we wonder whether employers will really recognise the certificates issued by the SNCFP as a valid accreditation of a person's competences and know-how. Experience with current qualification and

certification systems has shown that the industrial world has little faith in the accreditations issued by the educational world. The fact that employers from every sector, as well as other employment stakeholders, are involved in the definition and implementation of the SNCFP constitutes an opportunity to reverse this trend. However, there is still work to be done, at least in the definition of professional competences and qualifications at lower levels, where in most cases the extent and diversity of the specific professional activities listed in each of the competence units covered by each qualification appear to be out of the reach of people who hold lowly qualified jobs, since the tasks assigned to them are more uniform, repetitive and limited.

Lastly, let us take a look at the SNCFP's potential for integration. Will the approach represented by the SNCFP reduce or widen the social divide? We have reservations as to whether the certification of competences and their formal recognition will in fact improve the employability of people with low qualifications and their career prospects. It may merely shift the entry threshold to the 'formal' labour market, further distancing, if that were possible, people in the lower social strata, with lower levels of education and fewer formal, demonstrable accreditations – the most vulnerable sections of the working class – from a possible path of social integration via employment. This is one of the most notorious effects of an increase in the educational level of the general population, which upsets the employment pyramid, resulting in workers with higher levels of education doing jobs designed and structured for lower levels. The question is, could something similar happen with the lower levels of the professional ladder, leading to a situation whereby no formal qualification is necessary to do a certain job but we end up using the requirement of a formal accreditation as a means of personnel selection?

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